



The Leeds  
Teaching Hospitals  
NHS Trust

# Local PUVA treatment with oral psoralen

Information for  
patients

Your doctor has referred you for a course of PUVA treatment for your skin condition. This leaflet explains this treatment in detail, including its risks and benefits. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

## **What is PUVA?**

PUVA is a treatment where a medication called Psoralen (P) is usually taken by mouth as a tablet. The skin is then exposed to UVA light. This is a type of ultraviolet light and is part of the types of ultraviolet light given off by the sun. The purpose of the Psoralen is to make the skin more sensitive to healing by the light. It achieves this in a number of ways, including reducing the activity of immune cells in the skin, which are overactive in many skin conditions. Since 1974, PUVA has widely been used in this country, the USA and Europe for the treatment of a number of skin conditions, including psoriasis and eczema.

## What does the treatment involve?

PUVA therapy must be carried out in hospital under medical supervision. It will be necessary for you to attend twice weekly during the course of treatment. The length of the treatment course will vary from one patient to another, an average course is usually between 8 - 10 weeks. The Psoralen medication is taken by mouth, 2 hours before you attend the Unit for exposure to the UVA light. The tablets should not be taken on an empty stomach but with a snack or a light meal.

The number of tablets prescribed by your doctor depends upon your height and weight.

Light exposure to your hands and / or feet will take place in a specially designed Unit containing fluorescent tubes. Increasing doses will be given at each visit, depending on the reaction of your skin.

To make sure all the affected areas of your skin receive the UVA treatment and are exposed evenly each time, you will be given specific instructions on how to position your hand and / or feet on the Unit.

Psoralen tablets make both the skin and the eyes sensitive to light for 24 hours. It is, therefore, most important that you wear protective glasses for 24 hours after you take your tablets, outdoors or indoors during daylight and near any fluorescent light at night. You will also need to wear eye protection during the treatment itself. This protects your eyes against damage from PUVA.

## Things to avoid

- Throughout the course of treatment, you should not sunbathe or use a sun bed at any time.
- On the day of treatment, you should avoid unnecessary exposure to direct sunlight (even through window glass). Cover up with loose fitting, long-sleeved clothes. Use a sunscreen with an SPF factor of at least 30 that protects against UVA and UVB rays. Re-apply it regularly. You may also want to wear a hat after your treatments on sunny days, particularly if you don't have a lot of scalp hair.
- Do not wear perfumes, deodorants, aftershave lotions or other cosmetic products before your treatment. Some of these contain substances, which make your skin more sensitive to light and can cause patchy discoloration of the skin, which may take some months to fade. You can, however, use these after treatment. For the same reason, please let us know if you have started any new medications while having treatment, as some can make your skin more sensitive to light.
- Alcohol must be avoided before your PUVA treatment.
- Although there is no clear evidence that PUVA can damage a developing foetus, for the absolute safety for the baby, you must not become pregnant during treatment.

## What are the possible side-effects?

1. There is a small risk that your skin may burn, with redness and soreness and very rarely, blistering (particularly in patients with a fair complexion) although these effects are minimized by careful selection by the staff of the UVA dose, which they will give. The risk of this can also be reduced by making sure that the exact same areas of your hands and / or your feet are exposed to the light at each treatment.
2. If you should develop excessive redness of your skin following treatment, please contact the nursing staff in the Dermatology department on **0113 3924349**.
3. Occasionally, patients develop polymorphic light eruption, which is an itchy rash due to sunlight. Some patients can also develop inflammation around hair follicles (folliculitis).
4. **PUVA pain / PUVA itch**  
This is a very rare side-effect where patients develop a painful itching sensation of the skin. If this side-effect occurs, treatment needs to be stopped.
5. **Skin dryness**  
This can be helped with liberal use of moisturizing creams. It is important that you use all the topical therapy (creams and ointments) recommended by the department during the course of treatment.
6. If you do not wear the eye protection on the Unit and glasses for 24 hours after taking the psoralen tablets, you risk developing sunburn like reaction to your eyes within a few hours of exposure. In the long-term, there is also an increased risk of developing cataracts if you do not wear the recommended eye protection.

7. Some tanning of your skin is likely to occur.
8. **Nausea**  
This can be reduced by taking the tablets with food. If severe, a different psoralen tablet can be given.
9. Long-term use of PUVA (repeated PUVA therapy over many years) causes premature ageing in the skin (dryness, pigmentation, freckling and wrinkling) and increases the risk of developing skin cancer. It is, therefore, our policy to restrict the total amount of PUVA treatments that you can have. Present evidence suggests that you should not receive more than 150 treatments over a lifetime.

## Practical points

- The prescribed number of psoralen tablets should be taken 2 hours before attending the Unit for treatment. This is very important to ensure the required concentration is reached in the skin.
- The psoralen tablets should not be taken on an empty stomach but with a small amount of food.
- Protective glasses must be worn for 24 hours after taking your tablets, indoors and outdoors during daylight, and close to any fluorescent lights at night. Sunglasses or prescription glasses supplied by your optician with a special UV filter coating are suitable. These can be checked in the Unit. Many manufacturers of sunglasses label their products as UV400 protection and these are particularly suitable. Protective glasses are also supplied by the Unit.

- On no account should the protective glasses or face shield used during the light exposures on the Hand and Foot Unit be removed.
- Throughout the course of your treatment, you should not sunbathe or use a sunbed at any time. During bright sunny days, sunblock may be required on exposed sites e.g. face, neck and hands etc. Care should be taken when working in the garden, taking long walks and working outdoors, especially on a day of treatment. Protective clothing such as a hat, gloves and long-sleeved garments are advised.
- For the phototherapy to be effective, you must use a regular appropriate moisturizer as well as your other prescribed creams. If you are not sure which moisturizing creams you can use, please ask a member of the Phototherapy Unit staff.
- For your treatment to be effective, it is essential to attend regularly.

If you are unable to attend for treatment, you should telephone the nursing staff in the Dermatology department on **0113 3924349** with an acceptable reason for cancelling. If you fail to attend for two treatments without telephoning with a reason, your treatment time will be given to another patient and you will be discharged back to the care of your GP or consultant.

- All of your valuables are your own responsibility.

## Storage of results

We record the information about your treatment on a secure database for audit purposes in accordance with good medical practice. The anonymised data may also be used for research.

To help the smooth running of the Unit and our endeavour to give a high standard of care, we would appreciate your co-operation in all of the above points.

## What did you think of your care?

Scan the QR code or visit [bit.ly/nhsleedsfft](https://bit.ly/nhsleedsfft)

*Your views matter*



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